

**SHOULD**  
**A WRITER**  
***EVER***

**WRITE FOR FREE?**

**WRITERS, EDITORS,**  
**AND TEACHERS**  
**SPEAK OUT.**

*By K. L. Romo*

**Whether we should ever write for free is a hot topic in the writer community.**

Is it ever OK to put our own projects and careers ahead of the *greater good*? Does it depend on whether we need the money to pay our bills or whether we're just starting out? Does it matter if we rack up bylines without pay while journalism outlets still make money from our hard work?

Personally, I believe there are times when it's OK to write for free. If it's your own blog or website, you probably won't get paid (unless, of course, you have a huge following and are able to make money from ads). If you're just starting out, need bylines for your resume, and can't find any paying gigs without clips, go for it. If you feel passionate about a topic or situation and want readers to become aware of it for the good of society, by all means. If you want to donate your time and talent to a nonprofit organization or cause, write away. But otherwise...writing without pay just to get a contract is probably not the best way to help the industry and would be detrimental to those freelance writers who depend on paychecks from their articles and essays to pay the bills.

But that's just my opinion – what about the rest of the writing community? Nearly every person I contacted was more than happy to put in their two cents on this controversial issue. Here is what more than 20 writers, editors, and writing instructors have to say in answer to the question: **Should we write for free or not?**

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» **I usually tell people** not to write for free – I think it's a dangerous trend that devalues all our hard work. But once in a while, it makes sense.

For example, right after a new book of mine came out a few times, I've given away excerpts to get publicity. I've also done blogs for *Huffington Post* and *Psychology Today* to try to reach a bigger audience, which seems to have worked. But I think a millionaire who got rich from a divorce settlement shouldn't make more money from a website that doesn't pay her writers while hypocritically pretending she's helping other women thrive.

—Susan Shapiro, writing professor and NYT best-selling author/coauthor of 10 books, including *Unhooked*, *Lighting Up*, and *Only as Good as Your Word*

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» **If a publication isn't** offering payment, I think you need to figure out what you're getting out of it and if it's worth it. Exposure can be worth a lot or a little, depending on the publication. If apprentice writers want to break in that way, or if professional writers want to promote their other work that way, it's up to them.

—Daniel Jones, *Modern Love* editor, New York Times

» **There are a couple** of circumstances under which writing for free are understandable, like if you're just starting out as a writer and have zero clips, or if you're contributing to a nonprofit project that you feel really passionate about. But in general, the practice of agreeing to work for free, or for that insidious nothing compensation “exposure,” only contributes to the cycle that allows outlets to exploit the labor of creatives who have been brainwashed into thinking that having their work published is a compliment for which they should be grateful.

—Lilly Dancyger, deputy editor, *Narratively*

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» **I agree with Samuel Johnson** that “no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.” So, in general, authors should never write for free. That said, if you're starting out, you need to publish frequently and widely. If that means doing things for little or no money at first, then by all means. But don't get caught in that trap for long. Believe in the worth of your work, and ask for that worth in payment.

—Mark Sullivan, author of *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*

› **I think writing for free** can be valuable in certain instances. For example, a debut author attempting to establish herself might want to take every opportunity to put her name out there, particularly on literary websites or print issues that are reputable and well read, even if they are unpaid. Certain places can't afford to pay, and, for a new author, it is still a great opportunity for exposure. I do think at a certain point, a writer should be compensated more often than not, but even that is not always accurate or feasible. It is true that some writers don't know how to go after and expect being paid for their work, and they should go after it and expect it. But not everything valuable pays, so it is not a hard and fast rule. So, I think a writer should go for a balance between the two, sometimes being unpaid for a quality article and sometimes only accepting paid assignments. This includes speaking engagements, too.

—Taylor Larsen, author of the novel *Stranger, Father, Beloved*

› **Everybody's different, of course**, but it strikes me that it depends where you are in your career. When you're starting out, most any publishing credits are good, but after you've been around for a while and have enjoyed the feeling of getting paid to write, you get more choosy. There's only so much time, you know? It's tough enough for a writer to make a living, so you gotta be strategic. If your goal is to build a literary reputation, submitting stories to leading literary journals, which pay either little or nothing, [this strategy] is smart, and can pay off down the road, with book contracts, teaching, or speaking gigs and the like. If your goal is to write movies or video games with stories, you write scripts on spec. I write my blog for free every week, and I haven't directly monetized it yet, but meanwhile, it helps me connect with readers and friends. The final judgment: Can you justify free work because it a) could lead to paying work, or b) is a worthwhile promo/marketing strategy? If yes, maybe you do it. If no, get something else going that will work for you

both artistically and financially.

—Elizabeth Sims, author of nine novels and dozens of articles on the art and craft of writing and story writing instructor at Ringling College of Art and Design

› **As a professional writer**, my first response is no, no, no! What do editors think we live on, air? Plus, it's also an issue of respect. I have worked hard to learn how to write well. I make sure to deliver quality content and meet deadlines. Why, then, shouldn't I be afforded the respect of getting paid for supplying my prose to the publication? All that said, I do make exceptions – if the publication is new or a literary journal, and I appreciate its mission; if someone I like needs a favor; or if I have a story I am eager to see published in a media outlet with national scope. But even then, if that site doesn't pay, I hesitate. This situation just happened about two months ago, when I had an essay from a new book I'm working on accepted at a major online publication. I know all about how selling individual essays from a book-in-progress is supposed to enhance my platform and boost my author profile, and goodness knows I need help in both those areas. But I've yet to sign the contract the editor forwarded to me because I'm stuck on the fact that I won't see any payment for this essay that took me several months to write. And while it's only a secondary point, what goads me further is knowing the publisher is ridiculously rich, the publication is quite profitable, and it touts the quality of its content. Hmm? All that said, I wouldn't be having such a rigorous internal debate about signing that contract if I was a newbie writer. If that was the case, I'd be much more receptive to writing for free to accrue bylines and experience. Regardless, I still caution writers, don't give too much away. Don't drink the Kool-Aid about the benefits of exposure. Exposure is good, but sooner rather than later you deserve to get paid for your work.

—Joni B. Cole, essayist and author of the new book *Good Naked: Reflections on How to Write More, Write Better, and Be Happier*

】 **For me, it comes** down to two issues. What do I intend to accomplish with that writing? Does the publication truly respect its writers? The article I wrote for the WFWA Write On! [e-zine] was free. Pay didn't matter because WFWA [Women's Fiction Writers Association] is a nonprofit support association. Helping my friends and the organization I love was my primary intention. Many people feel the same way about literary journals. They're willing to accept payment in copies because those publications celebrate literature that wouldn't be published elsewhere. When I went looking for homes for a personal essay, I only approached publications that paid.

—Michele Montgomery, writer and screenplay analyst

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】 **Writing for free makes** sense...IF there's potential value. For example, when I moved to Sarasota in 2008, I sent out letters to all three glossy regional mags. By way of introducing my work to them, I offered to do one piece gratis. *SCENE* magazine asked me to do a 1,000-word advertorial on a local travel agency. They loved the piece and asked me to write two for the following month. At that point, I explained what my professional rates were. Now here we are, seven years later, and I cover my mortgage (plus some) by writing two columns and two to three other pieces per month for *SCENE*. Was it worth giving two hours of my time for free back in 2008? You tell me!

—Ryan G. Van Cleave, author of 20 books and professor at the Ringling College of Art and Design

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】 **The bulk of my** writing is writing I do for pay. And I always go into every project with the expectation that I will find a home for it that will pay me. But sometimes that doesn't work out, and if I feel like I've pitched that project or essay or short story to the best of my capability, then I'm happy with wherever it lands. (My debut novel's publication came without an advance, for instance, although the royalty scheme is generous and my publisher has provided incredible value.) There's

also a complex, as-yet-to-be-fully-clear system of balances in my head: IF I have placed a story or an essay somewhere for pay recently, say, THEN I "get" to submit someplace else "for free." No telling what tips the scale. I also do a large amount of pro bono work for the disaster-relief agency I volunteer for. When we deploy to areas of disaster, we're expected to send home news stories and reports, but that's kind of a given: When we're deployed, our time and whatever work we generate there is on behalf of the agency, so that's one bucket. But the other bucket is fundraising strategies, letters, and work on behalf of the agency, and that can easily go above and beyond my strict remit as an in-field volunteer and fundraiser.

But your question was: is it OK? Yeah, it's OK, within reason. Does your eco-system, your personal eco-system, allow you to write for free? To wit: Have you earned enough this month for the necessities? Do you want to call yourself a professional writer? Are you at a point in your craft where you can afford to publish for free? (There is a difference in the editing process, sometimes, between publications that pay and publications that don't pay.) Do you know about what it actually means to work with the editor of a paying publication? If you've never worked with such an editor, that's something you should know about and try. Working with an editor can up your craft game by untold levels – not to mention the professional experience you'll gain. At the *Tahoma Literary Review*, for instance, when I go into editing, I am keenly aware that the magazine's bottom line depends in part on the success of that piece, and that we are paying good money for it, so that adds yet another layer of urgency to the editing.

But, ultimately, there will be opportunities that come your way that will not pay. Maybe it's a volunteer gig that's close to your heart. Maybe it's a place to publish that you just really want. Maybe you've pitched the hell out of this story; you love it the way it is; you want it to go somewhere, and you don't care where, and anyway, publishing in that venue would be a real feather in your cap. Then, yes. Do it. But be responsible

about it. Writing is a business. It can be your business, if you want it to be. But it won't be without cash inflow – and output. Your work is the output, your commodity, if you will. What would you like your input to be?

—Yi Shun Lai, author of *Not a Self-Help Book: The Misadventures of Marty Wu* and nonfiction editor for the *Tahoma Literary Review*

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» **It depends on where** the writer is in his or her career, and where the writing will appear. For instance, if one is just starting out and needs clips, writing for free may be a good solution. More established writers may want their work to appear in a literary journal, or [some] other outlet that doesn't pay, in order to raise their profile. This could be a strategic move for writers hoping to land an agent or book deal. [And] sometimes a writer may simply want their work in a certain publication, for whatever reason (status, personal goal), and that's a very good reason to write for free. However, those examples aside, I am dismayed by how many outlets (*HuffPost*, for example) make a lot of money off the backs of writers working for free. Rates for freelance writers have gone down drastically in recent decades, and part of the reason is that so many writers are willing to write for free. I think it's OK if the writer gets something out of it, if the work is a stepping stone to a goal, but otherwise I always advise writers to try and get paid for their work before giving it away.

—Jaimie Seaton, freelancer for more than 20 years in numerous publications, including the *Washington Post* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

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» **The recent growth of** online publications has allowed for more writing opportunities and, unfortunately, a larger number of unpaid writers. Many in the writing community are concerned that this is impacting a writer's ability for financial independence. However, this posits the notion that writing has been a historically prof-

itable profession. This is untrue. James Joyce sold tweed jackets to fund his career. William Faulkner worked as a postman and power plant manager. Ken Kesey worked as a night cleaner in a mental hospital. While our civilization has clearly benefited from these individuals using words to express human behavior, our reality demonstrates that this is not always financially compensated. These men needed outside work to create their words. Is the market of unpaid freelance work subverting writing into an uncompensated vocation? Or could it be creating more vehicles for exposure in a field that has never been directly linked to financial gain? History has me siding on the latter.

—Nancy Kidder, writer based in Washington, D.C., and adjunct writing professor at American University

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» **I'm not going to** say every writer "should" work for free, but there's no getting around the fact that every writer I know – including myself – did. I know countless best-selling authors who've started out by writing the book that made the difference in their spare time because they worked a full-time job. Every media outlet I have written for as a professional freelancer expects to see a "clip file" or portfolio of previously published work. I can provide that now, but, yeah, I started out writing for free. Not because I lack self-respect or didn't know what I was doing, but because I knew every byline and blog post was a stepping stone to bigger and better things. I didn't see it as not getting paid, because it was more than that. It was about getting the experience I needed to get to where I wanted to be.

—Pauline Campos, writer

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» **When I write articles** or blogs for free, it's intentional to build my personal brand and give back to the writing community. However, it's important to weigh the opportunity costs of doing so. I consider writing a profession, a business. When we give it away too often, we diminish the

marketplace value of our work for all writers.

—Nancy Johnson, author of an essay (as a paid contributor) for *O, the Oprah Magazine* and complimentary pieces for the online literary magazine *Women Writers*, *Women Books* and the blog *Thinking Through Our Fingers*

» **I have written for free** – a blog about life in Beirut that was a public way of sharing how I felt about life in Beirut – aimed at friends and family, but I was happy to share it with a broader audience ([amyiswriting.com](http://amyiswriting.com)). And I have written a couple of pieces that I posted on *Medium* about refugees, because it is a topic dear to my heart, and I wrote them because I hoped that others could also take actions to support refugees.

—Amy E. Robertson, freelance writer and editor

» **Generally, I think writers** should always be paid something for their work, but there are times when the benefit to the writer is not monetary, like when it results in exposure. For example, I recently wrote a guest blog post for a writing web site that was unpaid but resulted in a wave of new email subscribers, so that was well worth it. I'm just starting out with my blog and mailing list, so I would have preferred the exposure to the monetary payment.

—Sarah Bradley, freelance writer and founder of Pen to Paper Creative Writing Services

» **I also write for free** on topics I'm passionate about and want to get the word out on. For example, I wrote a piece on family biking for a local smart growth blog because I wanted people in that community to think about it. I see that sort of thing as a form of volunteer work.

—Shannon Brescher Shea, science, environmental, and parenting writer

» **I think there's a case** for writing for nonprofit organizations' blogs for free and sometimes for tak-

ing unpaid writing assignments for practical reasons: promoting a book or other project, for instance.

—Christine Ro, writer

» **I have written for free** on a number of occasions but rarely do these days. However, I did once recently on a subject that I was really passionate about, and that was not a mainstream topic that I was sure where to place, and I wanted to get the word out there as quickly as possible.

—Kate Orson, author of *Tears Heal: How to listen to our children*

» **A lot depends on** what kind of a writer you mean. A freelance writer who makes a living that way – probably not, except...as a way to begin, learn, then shortly move on. But a writer primarily interested in building publication credits in order to query agents for a novel or memoir – different story. In that case, pubs in non-paying literary journals/sites make sense. So much depends on what the writer wants or needs out of it.

—Lisa Romeo, author of the forthcoming memoir *Starting with Goodbye: A Daughter's Memoir of Love After Loss* and member of the Bay Path University MFA faculty

» **My first publishing experience** after my personal blog was as a contributor for a small online magazine. I wasn't paid, but the site's editors workshopped every single piece with me. They encouraged me and supported my voice. After six months, I was ready to move on, but I'll always be grateful to *Rosewater Magazine*.

—Rebekah Vineberg, writer, civil servant, and mother of two 

K.L. Romo writes about life on the fringe: teetering dangerously on the edge is more interesting than standing safely in the middle. She is passionate about women's issues, loves noisy clocks and fuzzy blankets, but HATES the word *normal*. Her historical novel, *Life Before*, is about two women separated by a century who discover they've shared a soul. Web: [KLRomo.com](http://KLRomo.com) or [@klromo](https://twitter.com/klromo).